

NWSA 2015

Title: Narratives of Debility: The Construction of the Vulnerable Subject in Policies, Representations, and Social Justice Projects

Rationale (max. 250 words)

This panel examines public responses to three different contemporary social justice/welfare campaigns: the gay rights movement, anti-poverty efforts in the aftermath of the Great Recession, and campaigns against human trafficking. Our panel intends to build from the arguments famously offered by Wendy Brown (1995) on the costs of identifying groups as victims for the state. This panel engages with the conference theme “Debility/Vulnerability” by exploring the ways these individuals are depicted as vulnerable and debilitated, or not, and some of the implications and negative repercussions of these representations. Many representations tend to focus on these individuals’ lack of agency and need for the paternalistic State’s protection, adopting a “savior” perspective that capitalizes on these groups’ allegedly miserable living conditions. The panel also considers a counter-example of efforts to mobilize the state on behalf of a middle class facing the *potential* of victimization. Our papers ask what is at stake in relying on narratives of vulnerability to seek State intervention and societal support in certain cases, and not in others? How do neoliberal ideologies permeate these narratives? Our panel contributes to existing dialogues on victimization vs. agency in sex work, the gendered and racialized character of the construction of the “struggling middle class,” and strategies of representation around lesbians and gay men in the equal rights era.

Abstract (Sara Rodríguez-Argüelles):

Paper title: Religion and the State: Sex Work and the Policies of Vulnerability

Following Bernstein (2007) and Berman (2006), in this paper I expand arguments that make the connections between prostitution, human-trafficking and Christian rhetoric. I will analyze U.S. public policy to trace how hegemonic approaches fighting human-trafficking have embraced Christian ideas on sexuality. These ideas have created two major fallacies at the heart of the U.S. policies on human-trafficking: First, the constant conflation of “prostitution” and “human-trafficking” as synonyms making women vulnerable subjects; and second, a neoliberal focus on individual causes and experiences of human-trafficking instead of examining the systemic forces responsible for it.